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ABSTRACT

Studies of business-education relationships since 1983 have consistently pointed out that they have had little, if any, impact on producing fundamental change in the educational system. During the past year, nationwide surveys of employers show a growing disenchantment by industry in these partnerships. Business-education partnerships cannot be expected to have a significant impact on building a successful school-to-work (STW) system for a number of reasons: a typical STW partnership functions like a project advisory committee; most partnership activities are brief and episodic and involve low levels of investment; employers and educators are not adequately trained to work collaboratively in planning and implementing STW programs; and employer involvement in education is limited to a school or classroom. Local and state STW planners face a formidable problem of identifying incentives for industry to broaden the use of its resources in improving the STW process. The centerpiece is a formal collaborative structure--an industry-education council (IEC)--through which the employment community channels its resources in a coherent manner into the total academic and vocational program directed at four priorities: intensive and continuous staff development, curriculum revision, upgrading instructional materials and equipment, and improving educational management. The IEC model operates with a board of directors representing leaders from industry and public/postsecondary education. (YLB)

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AACE Distinguished Member Series on Career Education

Making a Difference in Industry-Education Cooperation

Donald M. Clark

The September 1996 report to Congress on the implementation of the School-to-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 submitted by Education Secretary Richard W. Riley and Labor Secretary Robert R. Reich provides an opportunity to review the impact of industry-education collaboration on improving the school-to-work (STW) process.

I concur with the report's conclusion that "more must be done to involve employers." However, I question whether the stakeholders--industry (business, labor, government, and the professions) and education (public and postsecondary)--are, at this point, "coming together to form viable and vital partnershps" in STW, considering the track record of this form of collaboration.

Studies of "business-education partnerships" since the White House announcement in 1983 urging this type of connection between the two sectors have consistently pointed out that they have had little, if any, impact on producing fundamental change in the educational system. More specifically, they rarely encompass attempts to affect the curriculum, the overall educational process, or the acquisition of basic skills. Nor have they significantly affected the dropout rate of participating students.

Growing Disenchantment by Industry

During the past year there is evidence of a growing disenchantment by industry in these partnerships, according to nationwide surveys of employers conducted by the National Center on the Education Quality of the Workforce (EQW). The Center's EQW *Policy Statement on Connecting School and Work*, for example, points out that many business leaders entered partnerships with the best of intentions--but, by and large, "the accomplishments of these partnerships have been marginal and have not tackled the systemic problems in education."

Another EQW national employer survey revealed that most partnerships have diffuse and unquantifiable goals, and, in the worst case, are exercises in public relations: "Too often, business participation is on a part-time basis at best, and handicapped by lack of knowledge about the working of public schools."

Employers told interviewers, in a national survey *School-to-Work or School-to-What?* conducted by Public/Private Ventures (P/PV), that "we sit on some advisory comittees and run some programs that help a few individual students and get good press clippings for the company. But, we don't fool ourselves that any of this results in any fundamental systemic change in the way schools operate."

Building a Successful School-to-Work System

Given this experience, how can business-education partnerships be expected to have a significant impact on building a successful STW system? The reality is that they can't because a typical STW partnership functions like a project advisory committee without broad corporate CEO or senior executive staff representation. Most of the partnership activities are brief and episodic and involve low levels of investment; they seldom run long enough to make a long-term difference.

Employers and educators involved in partnerships are not adequately trained to work collaboratively in planning and implementing STW programs; there is a lack of intensity in conducting inservice training of professional staff; employer involvement in education is limited,

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in the main, to a school here and a classroom there--tinkering at the margin. On a scale of 1 to 10 used by television's McLaughlin Group, business-education partnerships would probably rate a 2 in terms of effectiveness in fostering substantive systemwide school improvement and STW.

If "more is to be done to involve employers" as stated in the STW report to Congress, it follows that local and state STW planners face a formidable problem of identifying incentives for industry to broaden the use of its resources--personnel, facilities, materials, and equipment in improving the STW process through "partnerships" in education in view of the previous discussion of the state of the practice.

It should be noted that industry has done little to engage itself systematically in STW since the federally sponsored initiative was launched 2 years ago. A P/PV study points out that "most employers have little knowledge of building a STW system in general and have shown little interest in the nitty-gritty mechanics of how a STW transition program should operate," particularly in work-based learning, a major component of a STW system.

I haven't observed employers and educators "coming together in viable and vital partnerships" in my travels and in tracking partnership developments in the literature during the 2-year period covered in the STW report to Congress or over the past 13 years since the partnership concept was launched. However, I have seen and experienced "what works" in industry-education collaboration that can make a difference in fostering substantive school improvement and workforce preparation.

What Works in Industry-Education Collaboration

The centerpiece is a formal collaborative structure--an industry-education council (IEC)--through which the employment community channels its resources in a coherent manner into the total academic and vocational program directed at four priorities: intensive and continuous staff development, curriculum revision, upgrading instructional materials and equipment and improving educational management--all central to school improvement and to developing a comprehensive STW system.

The IEC model, which became operational in the U.S. starting in California in the mid-1960s and Canada in the early 1980s, operates with a board of directors representing leaders--the power structure--from industry and public/postsecondary education who, in many instances, also are involved in local economic development. This board of stakeholders functions with a full-time executive director (I served in this position for 9 years), support staff, and a budget to implement the council's long-term program, particularly in staff development.

Organizations such as the National Association of Manufacturers and the Canadian Chamber of Commerce have endorsed the IEC type of structure. IECs have carried out workforce preparation as a top priority in the past by effectively engaging industry in integrating Career Education into the K-12 curriculum, a process developed under the leadership of Dr. Kenneth B. Hoyt during his tenure as Director, Office of Career Education, U.S. Department of Education.

How can the state of the practice in industry-education collaboration be restored to the level of the 2 decades prior to 1983? At the outset, both sectors need to move beyond business-education partnerships to "what works" in unifying efforts between the employment community and public and postsecondary education.

Adopting the IEC model that emphasizes engaging the employment community fully into an alliance with education can make a difference in furthering the development of a more responsive academic, vocational, and STW integrated delivery system through the previously cited four priorities. It will require time, training, patience, discipline, hard work, commitment, and money over the long term.

Education and industry cannot afford anything less in responding to an unstable and uncertain workplace that confronts them now and into the 21st century.

Note. The National Association for Industry-Education Cooperation was established in 1964 to serve as the nation's principal advocate for fostering industry-education collaboration in school improvement, workforce preparation, and economic development.

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